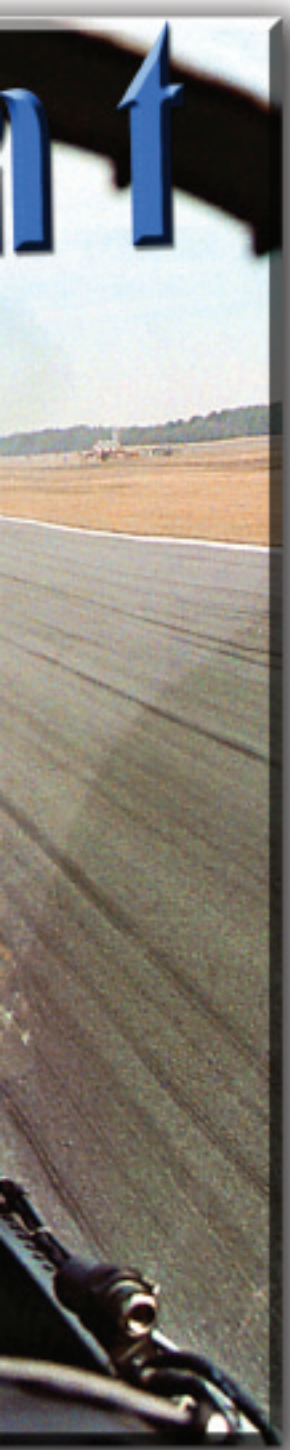
Photos and composite by Matthew J. Thomas

By Lt. Matt Pothier

I was in the backseat for a student's first Nav hop in the syllabus, known also as a low-level. As a new instructor at the Fleet Replacement Squadron, I was fired up by the student's performance on the low-level navigation portion. It was a good flight, with just a few minor administrative errors. We popped off the route near the Loom Lobby target range and slid back toward Miramar for the break on a beautiful, VFR, Southern California day.

The flight went well until I heard tower talk to an S-3 on a two-mile final, clearing him to land on runway 24 right. At the same time, my student was dirtying up the aircraft and going through the landing checklist. He reported abeam, and tower



cleared him to land on runway 24 left. He rogered the call without repeating the runway. I asked him if he had the S-3 in sight. "I've got him, sir," he said, as he began his approach turn. I asked him which runway he was cleared to land on, and he said, "The right," as was evident by the current angle of bank of the Hornet.

Well, that wasn't good. I had him confirm with tower which runway he was cleared to land on. He also admitted he did not see the S-3 we soon would rendezvous with. The near-catastrophe averted, he increased his angle of bank and planted the FA-18 on the approach end of runway 24 left.

We now were safe on deck, or were we? I had the S-3 in sight the whole time and would have been able to take the controls if my student had continued the approach on the wrong runway. That's the beauty of the two-stick trainers; you always can override a bad situation if your students don't recognize their errors in time. As instructors, we just have to set our own limits and realize when we have to step in.

Always remember, it's not over until you are back in the chocks. We were still doing 130 knots down the middle of runway 24 left.

I noticed something peculiar on the runway, and our nose was rapidly tracking toward it. We did not have time to add power to try to go over it, so both of us gave a little boot of right rudder to go around it. We passed the object, still doing 130 knots; it sneaked just underneath our left wing tip. It was a big, metal, swivel chair.

"Did you see that?" the student piped up, as the chair whizzed by.

All I could mutter while trying to avoid it was "Yup."

Neither of us had overreacted. We both applied a bit of right rudder. Yes, it was a very close left-to-left, but I am glad we didn't end up careening off the airstrip by overcorrecting and stomping on the rudder pedals. We straightened ourselves out down the runway and came to a stop.

"You just cleared us to land on a FODed runway. There's a metal chair on the centerline of runway 24 left, just past the approach-end-arresting gear," I growled over the radio to tower.

I could tell that tower was a little surprised, and 20 seconds later they let me know the airfield manager would speak to me in the squadron spaces.

It turns out there were two chairs on the runway. The second chair was off to the left, and I hadn't seen that one. Both chairs were positioned so tower could see only their side profiles. Even I couldn't spot them again until I got much closer to the approach end after taxing back toward our line.

The chairs were our LSO-platform chairs. Only five minutes before my landing, they had been blown onto the runway by a C-2 doing engine run-up checks on the off-duty (runway 28), with their tailpipes pointed directly at the LSO platform. These were big, old, metal chairs. Who would have thought they could be blown out on the runway so easily? We promptly cut the wheels off the bottoms of those hulking pieces of steel. No more inadvertent wheelchair races when the LSOs are out waving at Miramar.

Lt. Pothier flies with VMFAT-101.